

Children's Reactions to Separation and Divorce

Age	Typical Reaction	Helpful Strategies
0 – 2 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeding, toileting, and sleeping difficulties • Fear to leave a parent; clingy with parent • Crankiness, temper tantrums, crying 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children need physical closeness and continuity with one parent • Maintain needs promptly and consistently • Take extra time at leavings • Give love, attention, and reassurance • Have other parent visit the home often (1-3 hours 3 times per week)
2 – 3 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children experience “separation anxiety” and fear loss and abandonment • Whiney, clingy, crying at transitions • Emotionally needy, seeks physical contact • Regression in toilet training • Anxious at bedtime, wakes frequently 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reassure children by telling them you love them and by cuddling them • Allow some regression • Keep routines consistent • Children will adapt to longer separations from one parent through frequent visits and overnight stays but still take extra time at leavings
3 – 5 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children experience “separation anxiety” • Fear, confusion, clingy, whiney, needy • Fear of abandonment • Regression to earlier behaviour patterns (acting younger than they are) • Anxiety and guilt (“I caused the separation”) • Temper tantrums • Attempts to reconcile parents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell your children about separation • Explain you will not be getting back together • Reassure children of your love for them • Reassure children that it's not their fault • Handle tantrums with firm limits but allow expression of feelings • Extend visits into overnights (at 4 years old)
6 – 8 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grief and/or anger replaces denial • Sadness, crying, feelings of loss, anguish • Fear for the future • Nightmares • Missing the other parent • Wanting parents to reconcile • May refuse to go to school; school work may suffer • Physical symptoms might present (headache, stomach-ache, asthma) • Alliances between parents will shift • Fear of being displaced by new family/spouse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help them to express feelings • Reassure them of your love • Maintain a clear parenting plan • Encourage time with extended family and friends • Avoid pressure to choose sides • Maintain rules and routines • Encourage the child to draw pictures about her/his feelings and to explain the story and what it means to her/him
9 – 12 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shock, surprise, denial, disbelief • Intense anger (may be directed at the parent they think caused the divorce) • May feel parent is selfish for disrupting family • May blame and/or reject one parent • Vulnerability to loyalty conflicts • Vulnerability to alliances with one parent • Shift between maturity and dependency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage talking to neutral adult • Avoid blame • Give emotional support • Avoid burdening with your problems • Maintain a clear parenting but take into consideration their wishes • Seek counselling prior to remarriage • Encourage academic and social life
13–18 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ambivalence, surprise • Pain, anger, loss • Shift between maturity and dependency • Focused on peers • Worry about sex and relationships • May question or worry about their own ability to have successful relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage independence • Encourage active involvement with the family • Give emotional support • Maintain limits, rules, discipline, structure • Avoid putting the teen in the middle • Encourage contact with both parents • Make it clear that both parents are responsible for the divorce



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